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ABSTRACT

With the aim of providing a framework for developing successful staff development programs, 12 propositions, or statements of intent and commitment, are set forth in this paper. The first set of propositions states the guiding principles underlying the concept of staff development. The second set offers propositions for planninng staff development programs. In the third set, statements on program goals provide guidelines for program implementation. The final proposition emphasizes the importance of evaluation as an integral aspect of the development and implementation of staff development activities. (JD)

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STAFF DEVELOPMENT PROPOSITIONS:

A SCHOOL DISTRICT PERSPECTIVE

by

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Occasional Paper No. 7

Staff Development - A Commitment to Excellence

Every staff development program and activity demonstrates a commitment to some propositions. Sometimes these propositions are primarily intuitive and unwritten in nature. This can lead to confusion, inconsistency and unproductive conflict.

Publicly declaring the propositions underlying the staff development approach gives the program positive direction and support. Further, the propositions are open to clarification and influence by others. The following propositions are presented to facilitate discussion and offer guidance. Taken in concert, they weave together, meaningfully and purposefully, both a commitment to and expectation for excellence.

Guiding Principles

Proposition 1. Staff development is most successful when teachers, support staff, administrators and trustees share commitment and active support for the program.

Trustees and the chief executive officer demonstrate commitment and support through Board policy statements, the provision of necessary human and financial resources, by expressing high expectations for educational excellence, and public expressions of encouragement. Policy and finances should enable participants to attend some staff development activities during their regular work day. All staff, regardless of position description, tenure or title should participate in staff development activities as planners, leaders and participants. Administrators play a crucial role in publicly supporting staff development activities and privately encouraging staff members to attend optional activities.

Proposition 2. Staff development should acknowledge and reinforce the unique talents and humaneness of each individual.

The starting point in learning must always be in the individual's frame of reference. Participants should be encouraged and guided in clarifying beliefs and values in the light of their own experience and development. Attitudes of caring, respect and trust must be modeled and advocated in this process of introspection. This examination enhances each person's feelings of personal worth and competence. The resulting security and confidence increases the effectiveness of the person and the likelihood that he/she will risk trying a new method or different attitude.

From this base of respect and understanding, staff development should then increase the number of alternatives or options each person can use

to accomplish tasks and objectives. While presenting and considering alternative approaches, each person must be left with the ultimate responsibility for achieving work objectives or reaching the expected level of competency. A corollary to accepting responsibility is the authority to make pertinent decisions. Within this framework of responsibility staff development must remain a means to an end, not an end in itself.

Planning

Proposition 3. School districts should have a department whose prime responsibility is staff development.

Assigning staff development tasks as the prime responsibility of a line department ensures they will have an advocate with the dedication, skills, knowledge and resources to fulfill the tasks. A research report by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Education Management (1980) offers support for a separate department with the following statement. "Local resource personnel make better trainers than outside consultants, but many teachers would rather not be trained by local administrators. That may mean that staff members other than administrators should be the trainers and that the functions of evaluation and training have to be separated." (p. 184)

Proposition 4. The staff development program should be based on a blend of annual needs/interests assessment data and district priorities.

A common attribute of successful staff development programs is the extent to which they reflect the perceived needs and interests of potential participants. The most manageable method to assess participant needs and interests is through a questionnaire. However, informal feedback and dialogue are equally valuable. The more formal questionnaire should be used every three or four years, with informal feedback and dialogue being used in the interim years.

District goal priorities must also be determined each year. New initiatives and programs considered at the district level may not be sensed as needs or interests by staff members in their preliminary stages. Effective staff development activities can be used to launch these initiatives and programs while respecting the professional integrity of participants.

Student needs as shown in district goals or education statements and the extent to which students are attaining desired outcomes is another important source of needs assessment data.

Proposition 5. Staff development programs should be pre-planned for a whole school year in a systematic and comprehensive manner.

The program for the following year should be planned in the spring by a team representing those responsible for and those affected by the program. Pre-planning the program for the year accomplishes a number of important objectives. The size of the program can be deliberately set, rather than growing topsyturvy. Without planning, a program may grow too fast or too large so that there is a real possibility that quality might be sacrificed for quantity.

Proposition 6. Staff development programs at the school, curriculum and district level should be coordinated and articulated.

The magnitude and scheduling of programs at the school, curriculum and district level must be coordinated to avoid conflicts and overload for staff. This coordination must include other agencies, such as universities and teachers' federations, since their staff development programs and resources are an integral and crucial aspect of the total staff development opportunities in most school districts.

The articulation objective requires consideration of the complementary roles of school, curriculum and system staff development programs in content and process.

Proposition 7. Staff development should be closely interrelated and articulated with organizational development, curriculum development and developmental supervision.

Each of these activities share a common mission: development. As well each intends to improve the quality of experiences, programs and services provided for students. These activities represent different vehicles to achieve a shared mission. It is critical they act in concert so that the processes and content of each is supported and reinforced by the others.

For example, the district may be preparing to receive an influx of immigrants who will require English as a second language services. This may require changes in staffing and organizational arrangements, curriculum adaptation or development, staff development activities and follow-up developmental supervision to assist those involved. These activities should be jointly planned and implemented to complement and reinforce each other.

Implementation

Proposition 8. Educational theories and specific objectives should guide the design, implementation and evaluation of all staff development activities.

Educational theories can integrate accumulated knowledge in a field with the most recent research and thought. As such, the practices derived from it are most consistent, effective and current. However, the connection between theory and practice must be explicit and detailed. Adults need skills and knowledge relevant to their current problems, decisions and assignments. Activities that wander around in peripheral generalizations are virtually useless.

A good theory also enables participants to codify and better understand their own experiences and practices within a consistent frame of reference. Awareness of the theoretical premises on which intuitive practices are based enables and encourages exploration of alternative practices based on the same premises.

Objectives can also help give an activity consistency as well as direction. Sharing the objectives with participants allows them to work with a sense of purpose and meaning. Achieving the objectives can also be a motivating force for participants. Evaluation without objectives becomes amorphous and frustrating.

Proposition 9. Learning is a dynamic and continuous activity. Persons develop knowledge, skills and values through reflection on prior and new experiences and through interaction with peers and instructors.

Castell (1967) described two fundamentally different types of learning. Learning as a process "...means to acquire, retain, and be able to repeat or reproduce." (p. 34) Learning as an activity goes beyond this simple process to include "...getting to know, liquidating ignorance." This higher level learning has the following characteristics: "...it is fallible, purposive, critical, experimental, corrigible, reasoned out, has presuppositions and is a response to challenge." (p. 14) This second type of learning is particularly important in staff development.

This proposition is intended to be consistent with a learning model based on five elements:

(a) Learner involvement is structured activities such as simulations, problem solving, demonstrations, role plays and feedback inventories.

(b) Theory input, small group analysis and debriefing.

(c) Small group synthesis and evaluation of activities and learnings.

(d) Individual adaptation and application of significant learnings.

(e) Coaching and feedback to assist with application.

This type of concrete, experiential learning is advocated by many trainers and is supported in research (ERIC, 1980).

Staff development activities can also be very effectively guided by alternate learning theories. However, one should expect different outcomes from different learning theories or models. In other words, the learning model used should be matched to the desired learning outcomes and the needs of the participants. If learning means to acquire, retain, and be able to repeat or reproduce, a model based on reinforcement principles would be more effective.

Proposition 10. Effective interpersonal skills and group activities enhance learning in staff development activities.

Berger and Luckman (1967) have argued convincingly that reality is socially constructed. We create and recreate our world through interaction and discussion with others. To build on the combined knowledge, competence and experience base, individuals must work cooperatively and effectively. Norms of two-way communication, teamwork, productivity and responsibility should be modeled and promoted in staff development activities.

Staff development groups of five to eight are optimal in size. These small groups can join for occasional plenary sessions and lecturettes. Each small group should have a facilitator to assist with relationships and tasks.

Carkhuff (1971) has listed a number of the critical attributes of a helper or facilitator. The attributes include empathy, respect, warmth, genuiness, self-disclosure, concreteness, confrontation and immediacy of relationships. These are attributes which all group members should strive to obtain.

Proposition 11: Each participant should formulate and share action proposals to guide the application of workshop learning.

Good intentions are not enough when it comes to applying inservice learning. Factors such as busyness, fear of failure, lack of support and implementation difficulties make it easy to neglect follow-up. Implementation of each participant's action proposals should be encouraged and supported through follow-up developmental supervision which provides coaching and feedback and encourages mutual problem-solving. (Joyce, 1982)

An action proposal selected and written by each participant at the conclusion of each topic covered facilitates and encourages follow-up. Each proposal reflects something significant the participant has learned or become aware of during the session. Six questions should be considered by participants as they write action proposals:

(a) A technique, idea or principle I intend to use;

(b) The person(s) with whom I expect to use this action;

(c) The situations in which I anticipate using this action;

(d) My timeline for using this action proposal;

(e) The results I expect;

(f) A colleague (administrator, fellow staff member, workshop leader, etc) with whom I will share my action proposal and turn to for support, encouragement and assistance.

Evaluation

Proposition 12. Evaluation should be an integral aspect of the development and implementation of every staff development activity.

Program and personal performance are both enhanced by access to objective data which is intended to be developmental in nature. Effective evaluation focuses on obtaining and sharing information which is descriptive, specific, objective, relevant and timely.

Theory and practice from program evaluation offers direction and assistance in evaluating staff development. The following definition provides a framework for using program evaluation concepts and techniques. "Educational evaluation is the process of delineating, obtaining and providing useful information for judging decision alternatives." (Stufflebeam et al, 1971)

Conclusion

The propositions presented in this paper are just that. They are offered on the basis of first-hand experience, general education principles and a review of pertinent literature. Unfortunately, research in the area of staff development is very limited. Perhaps propositions such as these, from practitioners, will stimulate and facilitate further research, which is much needed.

Staff development propositions also have the potential to encourage and assist those engaged in staff development. While these propositions are intended to be used in concert, individual propositions may be useful to enhance an existing program. Indeed, if these propositions assist other practitioners to rationalize and enhance their program, this paper will have achieved an important objective.

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